

COLORADO CANYONS NATIONAL CONSERVATION AREA

Resource Management Plan and Environmental Impact Statement

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

ALTERNATIVES AND ENVIRONMENTAL CONSEQUENCES

Introduction

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) has prepared this draft Resource Management Plan (RMP) and Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) to provide guidance in managing public lands within the Colorado Canyons National Conservation Area (CCNCA) and to analyze the environmental impacts resulting from implementing the alternatives addressed in this draft RMP.

The planning area is composed of approximately 122,300 acres in western Colorado and its eastern boundary lies about 10 miles west of Grand Junction, Colorado (Figure 1-1). Included in the planning area are 75,550 acres of Wilderness designated as the Black Ridge Canyons Wilderness (BRCW) with 5,200 acres extending into eastern Utah at the CCNCA's western boundary. Another 1,865 acres of private lands exist within the CCNCA. A 24-mile stretch of the Colorado River dissects the planning area, running along the northern edge of the Uncompahgre Plateau.

Management guidelines developed in this draft RMP apply to BLM-managed land only and do not address management of private lands. The enabling legislation did not provide BLM with management authority for the river, and management is therefore excluded for this area as well.

The draft RMP is being prepared using BLM's planning regulations and guidance issued under authority of the Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976 (FLPMA). An EIS is incorporated into this document to meet the requirements of the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (NEPA), Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) regulations for implementing NEPA 40 Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) 1500-1508, and requirements of BLM's NEPA Handbook, H-1790-1.

Purpose of and Need for Action

The purpose of the CCNCA Act is to conserve, protect, and enhance, for the benefit and enjoyment of present and future generations, the special and unique values of the public lands making up the CCNCA, including the Black Ridge Canyons, Ruby Canyon, and Rabbit Valley.

The CCNCA RMP is being prepared to provide the BLM Grand Junction Field Office with a current comprehensive framework for managing the CCNCA and

BRCW. The purpose of this RMP also includes developing a thorough, practical management document, for the public, that defines management policies and actions and describes management goals and objectives for these public lands. Activities in the Black Ridge Canyons are to be managed in accordance with the Wilderness Act.

Planning Process and Public Collaboration

The planning process for the RMP began on December 12, 2001, with publication of the Notice of Intent in the Federal Register (Appendix 2). This RMP incorporates the BLM core objective of multiple use, allowing for as wide a range of activity as possible, while protecting these spectacular resources for future use and enjoyment. This document also represents the collaboration and communication among local citizens; organizations; and local, state, and federal governments throughout the past two years. A federally authorized Advisory Council was established to assist the BLM in developing and implementing the CCNCA RMP. The CCNCA Advisory Council comprises ten members of the public representing various popular uses of the area. In lieu of a formal and fixed public scoping comment period, the BLM chose to work extensively with citizen-based Working Groups that could effectively support the planning process. The formation of these Working Groups was based on four major geographic areas in the CCNCA – Mack Ridge, Rabbit Valley, the River Corridor, and the Wilderness.

This planning program also included project newsletters, field trips, numerous presentations and media spots, publishing a project web site (www.co.blm.gov/cocanplan), issuing press releases, and holding public open houses in both Grand Junction and Fruita.

During this planning process, each Working Group identified specific planning issues for each of the four planning zones within the CCNCA. Management recommendations were then developed by those groups, reviewed by the BLM Interdisciplinary Team of resource experts, and presented to the Advisory Council for discussion and revision or approval. The four planning zones shared core concerns; namely those of educating and informing users, encouraging cooperation among a diverse recreating public, and adequately providing for multiple use while protecting the resource.

A Management Situation Analysis (MSA) was conducted and a report prepared in late 2002, providing a thorough summary of existing resources and current management for those resource sectors of the planning area. The core sections of the MSA address resource area profiles and existing management situations.

Management Alternatives

BLM regulations require agency planners to develop a range of reasonable alternatives during the planning process. Through the planning process, a broad assortment of resource uses, combined in different alternative themes, was developed in an effort to thoroughly address resource issues and to resolve conflict among user groups. Reasonable, alternatives must meet the project purpose and need; provide a mix of resource protection, management use, and development; be responsive to the identified issues; meet the planning criteria (discussed in Chapter 1); and meet all federal laws, regulations, and BLM planning policies.

Through intensive public scoping meetings and guidance from both the enabling legislation and internal input from BLM resource experts, four alternatives were developed and analyzed for potential environmental impacts. A summary of each alternative's objectives is provided below, and a matrix comparing key points and differences of each alternative follows this section of the Executive Summary.

Common to all alternatives, the BLM management objectives will focus on preserving and protecting the CCNCA for the enjoyment of both present and future generations. Current recreational opportunities will be maintained to the maximum extent possible, and the BLM and grazing permittees will work together to manage grazing for sustainability and conservation in accordance with the Colorado Standards for Public Land Health and Guidelines for Livestock Grazing Management, current BLM policy, and the Wilderness Act. Travel management goals and actions are being established to allow motorized vehicle use only on those roads and trails designated for such use. Expanding education and interpretation opportunities for CCNCA visitors will be crucial in effectively implementing the plan and managing the resource. The Standards for Public Land Health will guide the BLM in managing all public lands within the CCNCA.

Alternative 1

This "no action" alternative leaves all management of the area in its current management situation as guided by the Colorado Canyons National Conservation Area and Black Ridge Canyons Wilderness Act of 2000, the Ruby Canyon/Black Ridge Wilderness Integrated Management Plan, the Grand Junction Resource Area Resource Management Plan, the Interim Management Policy for BLM National Monuments and National Conservation Areas, and the Colorado State Director's Guidance for the CCNCA.

Alternative 2

The emphasis of this alternative is to maximize multiple-use, recreational opportunities while conserving and protecting traditional uses and natural resources to the maximum extent possible.

Objectives for this alternative include:

- Preserving and enhancing traditional recreation activities—hiking, camping, mountain biking, off-highway vehicle (OHV) use, horseback riding, hunting, boating, and backpacking.
- Maintaining land health and improving priority areas of concern using a higher percentage of non-native species as necessary to stabilize soils.
- Concentrating activities in certain areas as a way to control use, manage resource impacts, and minimize dispersed resource impacts.

Implementation actions emphasizing recreation enhancement include:

- Trail construction based on net benefit to the environment and enhancement benefits to users.
- Limiting all use to existing roads and trails.
- Designating campsites and eliminating dispersed camping.
- Requiring fire pans and portable toilets and prohibiting firewood cutting in high-impact areas.
- Improving current trails, ways, and facilities with increased maintenance.
- Developing new campgrounds with additional facilities (restrooms, kiosks).

Alternative 3

This alternative's emphasis is on maintaining the current level of enjoyment of the area's recreational opportunities and unique characteristics while recognizing that increased future use will trigger the need for increased levels of management. Monitoring for land health and visitors' beneficial experience will determine when increased levels of management are required (see discussion on Limits of Acceptable Change in Appendix 6).

Objectives for this alternative include:

- Preserving the character of the area.
- Preserving and enhancing traditional recreation activities—hiking, camping, mountain biking, OHV use, horseback riding, hunting, and boating.

- Maintaining land health and improving priority areas of concern.
- Expanding education and interpretation opportunities in high-use areas.

Implementation actions, enhancing recreation but with a greater emphasis on conservation, include:

- Incrementally moving toward concentrating activities in certain areas as a way to control use, manage resource impacts, and minimize dispersed resource impacts.
- Instituting systems for controlling visitation at high-use areas.
- Developing trails and adding facilities, as necessary, to restore natural resources impacted by excessive use and result in a net benefit to the environment.

Alternative 4

The emphasis of this alternative maximizes the conservation of natural resources in the CCNCA while still maintaining traditional uses and recreational opportunities to the greatest extent possible.

Objectives for this alternative include:

- Improving land health in all areas of concern.
- Preserving the character of the area.
- Expanding education and interpretation opportunities in all areas.

Implementation actions, emphasizing resource protection, include:

- Developing trails that result in a net benefit to the environment.
- Maximizing land health restoration using a higher percentage of native species.
- Encouraging wider “recreation buffer zones” around high-risk resource areas; such as riparian, wildlife, archeological, paleontological, and sensitive soils areas; and prohibiting or limiting use in these areas.
- Requiring fire pans and portable toilets and prohibiting firewood cutting in the entire CCNCA.

Agency-Preferred Alternative

Alternative 3, which attempts to balance recreation needs with resource protection, was selected as the preferred alternative based on the following:

- Meeting core objectives for resource envisioned by Working Groups and Advisory Council;

- Addressing common issues identified throughout the planning process;
- Public input;
- Consensus among user groups;
- Special and unique designation and values of planning area; and
- Laws and regulations.

The BLM selected this alternative after evaluating input from both the Working Groups and internal resource specialists. The management objectives in this alternative will ultimately guide the BLM in managing for a positive balance between multiple use and conservation of the planning area, incorporating beneficial parts of the other three alternatives.

Environmental Consequences

None of the alternatives have the potential to result in significant adverse impacts or cause irretrievable damage to the resource. Resource management in Alternative 1 would not change from current policy. Alternative 2 offers the greatest potential for impacts to the human environment by providing for increased and enhanced recreational opportunities and user facilities. Alternative 3 tends to provide a mix of impacts within the range of those found in Alternatives 2 and 4. Taking no action would restrict and potentially prohibit the BLM from implementing management measures necessary for not only protecting the resource but also meeting the demands of increased recreation. The matrix summarizing the potential impacts of each alternative is included at the end of this Executive Summary. A complete discussion on impacts of the four alternatives is provided in Chapter 4 of this draft RMP.

Consultation and Coordination

As described above and in detail in Chapter 5 of this draft RMP, the BLM used a community-based planning process to gather public input and address resource issues. While public comments have been accepted throughout this planning process, the BLM collaborated closely with a Citizen's Advisory Council and four Working Groups composed of stakeholders in, and representative user groups of, the planning area. The Working Groups set an intensive meeting schedule for over a year and may again be called upon as necessary throughout the plan's implementation. In addition to these meetings, the ongoing monthly Advisory Council meetings, and numerous public open houses; the BLM has met with the Quiet Trails Coalition, the Southern Ute Indian Tribe, the Northern Ute Indian Tribe, the Sierra Club, the Grand Mesa Jeep Club, private landowners, the Lions Club, and other special interest groups. The BLM continues to work closely with a neighbor to the CCNCA, the Colorado National Monument (National Park

Service), which is in the process of developing its own management plan. Other inter-agency meetings include those with the Bureau of Reclamation, Department of Natural Resources, Colorado Division of Wildlife, U.S. Geological Survey, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The BLM has also consulted and coordinated planning activities with federal, state, county, and local government elected officials and representatives. Communication is ongoing and will continue through the implementation of this plan and beyond. Chapter 5 provides a detailed discussion of the BLM's consulting and coordinating activities with the public.